

Water Sports Safety

Many of us may seek temporary relief (physical and/or mental) from the heat and conditions of summer by waterskiing, sailing, boating, swimming and many other water sports. Fun and pleasure are often a major factor for involvement in water activities, but these activities all have an accompanying need for safety awareness and practice. By knowing and implementing safe practices associated with your fun, you will help ensure continued pleasure in the future.

While most of these activities have specific requirements of skill and knowledge due to equipment, there is one safety skill that you will need for almost all: know how to swim. Swimming is the most important skill that you should have to reduce your risk of serious injury or worse.

The following items are just some of the myriad of fun activities that we have created that are water oriented. The safety items that we are listing are by no means all inclusive, but are basic building blocks that hopefully will prompt you to learn more about how to more fully and safely enjoy these summer pastimes.

Swimming

Swimming is the most basic of water sports, and perhaps the most popular. In terms of equipment, preparation, and time involved getting ready for an outing, swimming is the easiest water activity to get rolling on. Whether at a swimming pool, lake, river, ocean or swimming hole in a small stream some simple tips (good tips for all water sports) can help ensure a good, safe outing:

- Obey all posted signs and rules
- Be aware of the “dangerous toos”—too tired, too cold, too far from safety, too much sun, too much strenuous activity, while swimming. If you are experiencing these events, it is time to come out of the water.
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages or drinks, they will impair balance and coordination, and its effects may help lead to hypothermia. Do however have water and other drinks available to stay hydrated.
- Keep an eye on the weather. At the approach of bad weather, come out of the water.
- If outdoors, protect yourself from overexposure to the sun by using sunscreen, wearing a hat, and protective eye wear.

Boating

Whether powered by sail, engines, or oars; boats are a means of escape from the shore and a chance to get in some fishing, skiing, or quality time alone with family and friends. Operating a boat, whether a little dinghy with oars on a pond, or a large boat that qualifies as a second home requires you to be familiar with the equipment and your

ability to master the craft. The safety precautions mentioned above with swimming also apply here, as well as the following:

- Follow all local and state rules and regulations regarding safety and survival equipment (such as personal flotation devices), signals, and alcohol.
- Prepare a float plan and leave it with family or friends in the event of delays, or emergencies. A good float plan should include details on the boat and trip, such as registration number, names of those in your outing, estimated route, time of departure and estimated return, and perhaps a cell phone number.
- Inspect your boat and equipment before leaving the ramp or dock.
- Accept the fact that as “Captain” of your boat, you are responsible for ensuring that all aboard are safe. Do not endanger your passengers by reckless acts.
- Most fish and game departments and volunteer agencies such as the Coast Guard Auxiliary offer low cost (and sometimes free) courses on boating safety and navigation. If you are new to the sport, or just want to broaden your knowledge base, they will be happy to help you locate courses in your local area. Many courses are also increasingly available on-line.

Water Skiing

Safe water skiing depends a great deal on the condition of the boat, equipment, and the skill of the operator. The wearing of a life jacket or vest is crucial in the event of an accident where you take a nasty spill and lose your ability to swim. Other precautions include:

- Make sure that a lookout is watching the skier at all times.
- Know and use proper hand signals.
- Do not ski at night or in restricted areas.
- If operating the boat, and you are approaching a fallen skier, cut the motor off
- Inspect skis and fittings, and tow ropes before going on the water.

While slightly off topic, it is increasingly common for people to attempt to body surf by hanging on to the swim platform of power boats. There is a hidden, colorless, odorless danger in this activity; carbon monoxide from the exhaust. Do not surf from, or allow others to surf using the swim platform.

Diving and Snorkeling

A fascinating world awaits one beneath the surface of the water, and diving is becoming increasingly popular. Snorkeling does not require the formal training and equipment required of diving, while allowing you to enjoy a glimpse of the underwater world. Both sports require a basic knowledge of the equipment (diving requires training from qualified instructors as well) and some common precautions are:

- Never snorkel or dive alone.
- Never go out on rough water, or in to dangerous areas for which you are not trained, such as caves.
- Be aware of the water currents and temperatures.
- Know what the day’s weather forecast is; leave the water if bad weather threatens.

- Inspect your equipment before going aboard the boat.
- Ensure the diving flag is hoisted before you enter the water.

Personal Watercraft

This relatively new addition to the waterways is a joy to many, and also a bane to others (due to reckless operation by a proportion of personal watercraft operators). These craft are evolving into larger, more capable vessels from the earlier models. Offering a great deal more freedom and speed than regular boats, they also require the operator to be skilled. Most states have regulations and requirements for training of operators, licensing, safety equipment, and age restrictions. Common precautions include:

- Know and observe state and local regulations.
- Be respectful of other boats and craft in the area.
- Personal watercraft life jackets are built to different standards than those for other water sports; this helps you withstand the impact of a fall at high speed. Wear an appropriate jacket.
- Ride your craft with others, never alone.
- Avoid alcohol consumption before and during riding.

Tubing and Rafting

For those of us who would rather not worry about running out of fuel for a boat or personal watercraft, tubes and rafts will be just fine, thank you. Floating downstream in a tube is a good way for a couple of hours to pass. Rafting can be very exhilarating, but until you are skilled always use a guide service. As well as re-emphasizing the need for swimming, the use of sunscreen, and being alert to the weather forecasts, rafting and tubing have other hazards that you should guard against:

- Do not overload a raft. This will help prevent you getting swamped.
- Do not go rafting or tubing after a heavy rain. Water levels will rise, currents will become faster and dangers such as fallen trees and rocks can be hidden by muddy waters.
- Plan to get wet. Provide for a change of dry clothes and store them in a waterproof stuff sack.

By following basic safety precautions, getting training as recommended by professional organizations, and just slowing down a little, your summer outings on the water will be more enjoyable and help ensure future good times.